

MILWAUKEE COUNTY

Milwaukee gears up for historic election in which up to 70% of voters may not cast a ballot at polls on Nov. 3

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The Milwaukee area has several locations to drop off ballots, including this box at City Hall. Ballot drop boxes will be available 24 hours a day seven days a week. *Rick Wood / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

Exhibit 24

Milwaukee has installed 15 absentee ballot drop boxes ahead of November's presidential election, when the city's top election official anticipates 60% to 70% of Milwaukee voters will choose to cast their ballots without going to the polls on election day.

The city and state are expected to play crucial roles in the race between Republican President Donald Trump and his Democratic challenger, former Vice President Joe Biden.

And the city has been working to avoid a replay of April's election, when masked voters waited in long lines in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic to cast their ballots on election day and technical issues marred production of absentee ballots.

The drop boxes are one of a series of steps the city has taken in preparation for the election, in addition to hiring a communications firm, eliminating a third-party mail vendor and automating the assembly and mailing of requested ballots.

The 24-hour drop boxes are available outside City Hall, at the city's 13 neighborhood Milwaukee Public Library branches and at the Milwaukee Election Commission's warehouse at 1901 S. Kinnickinnic Ave.

Locations of Milwaukee secure ballot drop boxes



The drop boxes will be available until 8 p.m. on Nov. 3, when the polls close. The ballots will be collected each day by staff of the Election Commission and the frequency of collection will increase closer to the election.

Voters can confirm their ballots were received at myvote.wi.gov.

The city does not allow absentee ballots to be returned to polling places on election day. Instead, voters should use the drop boxes or return their ballots to Central Count, 501 W. Michigan St., by 8 p.m.

The city has temporary drop boxes set up right now and will replace them with permanent ones that will be used in future elections.

The boxes are under 24-hour video surveillance and have seals to ensure they haven't been opened in an unauthorized manner.

Milwaukee Election Commission Executive Director Claire Woodall-Vogg told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel that the temporary boxes are secure. For the permanent boxes that will replace them, she was factoring in both security and the ability to hold up over time.

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The absentee ballot boxes are among the steps the city is taking ahead of November, when the city estimates about 290,000 residents will vote. About 150,000 are expected to cast absentee ballots by mail.

The city will also operate 18 early voting sites — including Fiserv Forum and Miller Park — from Oct. 20 through Nov. 1.

It also eliminated its third-party mail vendor, meaning ballots will be delivered directly to the post office on St. Paul Avenue, and hired a communication firm to launch a voter education and outreach campaign.

Thursday is the deadline for clerks to send absentee ballots to any voter with an application on file. In Milwaukee's case, that amounts to just under 100,000 ballots.

Milwaukee County Clerk George Christenson said the ballots are being printed and will be delivered to the county's municipalities on Tuesday and Wednesday.

The city has also automated the process of assembling and mailing requested ballots, buying an envelope printer, folding machine and folding and inserting machine.

"This automation enables the city to eliminate the assembly delay no matter the volume of daily absentee requests, allowing experienced election workers and previously trained election temporary employees to be re-deployed to voting assistance and early voting sites as supervisors and lead workers," a letter from the city Election Commission to a Common Council committee states.

On election day, the city will have at least 172 polling locations available — a significant increase from the five voting centers the city opened in April, citing a severe shortage of poll workers. The city typically has 180 sites.

Having enough poll workers is not expected to be a problem in November, Woodall-Vogg said.

"I think that the pandemic has in an odd way made recruitment easier because the community had a visual of what happens when we have a poll worker shortage," she told a Common Council committee Monday.

As of midday Monday, the city had more than 1,800 poll workers between confirmed workers and those signed up for poll worker training. The goal is to have 2,400 election workers.

The city also now has 12 machines to count ballots, nine of which the city owns and three that are leased, Woodall-Vogg said. Backlogged machines have slowed ballot processing and, she said previously, before the pandemic the city was slated to have seven machines for the November election.

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